The Hour Glass and the Project Manager - Part 1

by W. Scott Cameron

Over the last eight years I have had the privilege of mentoring over 20 Project Managers (PMs). Since then, I have found myself thinking of the PM's job in terms of an hourglass. The PM's success is often determined by his or her ability to manage the passage of sand between the top and bottom of the hourglass. The top of the hourglass is the hierarchy, and the bottom the project team. Because both top and bottom are crucial to the success of a project, I spend a significant portion of any mentoring session focusing on ways to manage the passage of sand from top to bottom and bottom to top. In Part 1 of this story, I will focus on managing the project team. Part 2, next issue, will be about managing the hierarchy.

Since much is written and taught about how to manage project teams and projects (i.e. how to make schedules, estimates, etc.),I won't dwell on the basic knowledge that all PMs must have. When I mentor experienced PMs and technical engineers, the critical strategic question we try to answer is how to improve the odds that their projects will be successful. The most successful method we have found to improve project performance is to conduct anywhere between 1-5 peer reviews throughout the life of a project.

As the PM and I plan for a peer review, these are some of the things we discuss:

Purpose of the peer revie w – To gain as much valuable input in the shortest amount of time to improve the chances for a successful project and avoid disasters and known (by others) problems.

Who to invite – Just peers, no hierarchy. The most successful peers reviews I have attended consisted of diverse groups of people: technical engineering, project managers, construction managers, purchasing managers, finance managers, research & development personnel,and contractors. Ten to twenty people are enough—anymore than that becomes unmanageable, as each person will bring his or her own agenda.

What protocol to use – Peer review protocol is relatively simple. It requires the project team and the PM to concisely communicate their technical and executional strategies. The floor is then opened to all the invited guests (peers) for comments, critique, and clarifying questions. Prework can be sent out to the peers to review prior to the meeting. Peers are required to be open, honest, and engage in the communication or not bother to attend the review.

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How long should it be – A maximum of 6-8 hours, including lunch and breaks. The PM usually runs the meeting and has to insure that all the "peers" are contributing ideas. There are a lot of topics to cover but the PM must go over them quickly to avoid one or more individuals grandstanding.

How to summarize the discussion – Take copious notes and display them on the wall during the meeting. In the last peer review I attended, there must have been 30-40 pages of flip chart paper capturing all the ideas/comments on a $50MM project. These were then typed and distributed to all the participants with a note to them and their boss thanking them for their contributions and for helping improve the success of the project.

What to expect of a peer revie w – Out of the 30-40 pages of notes on flip chart paper, there were only 5-10 "nuggets"that the project team went on to use and helped them to improve the technical, cost and schedule aspects of the project. Implementing these nuggets more than made up for the cost of the peer review.

As we have conducted more peer reviews, we've noted that the invited peers are beginning to take one or two "nuggets"they had not considered back to their projects and programs. They also are exposed to other talented individuals within the Company who they may have heard about but never had the opportunity to meet and network with. Thus, the peer review process is proving to be a very important tool in the PM tool kit to improve the success of a project.